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SUBJECT: WOULD BOLIVIAN MILITARY GO ALONG WITH A CRACKDOWN?

REF: A. LA PAZ 432
[1](#)B. 2007 LA PAZ 3220
[1](#)C. 2007 LA PAZ 3153
[1](#)D. 2007 LA PAZ 3119
[1](#)E. DAO REPORT: IIR 6 808 0106 08

Classified By: A/DCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Although Post believes the Bolivian military would still balk at participating in a crackdown on the opposition in the Media Luna departments as we assessed in November 2007 (reftel d), some changes since then make the probability greater. First, the current senior military leadership is more beholden to Evo and therefore is more inclined to accept the government's justification of action against the opposition's "illegal acts," i.e. if the opposition proceeds with its autonomy referenda. Second, the military is better armed and equipped given Venezuelan arms and ammunition that have been supplied via Bolivian Air Force cargo planes. Post believes most or all of this ammunition is destined to Media Luna units to alleviate ammunition shortages, which were acute in 2007. Third, there have been changes in field commands in the Media Luna that have placed officers who are more prone to support Morales. Lastly, the December "trial run" mobilization means the military would be better prepared to act if called upon. Despite these factors, many of the impediments to using the military for overt political repression, or to quell civil unrest, remain. The most likely scenarios for military engagement are in a pre-emptive strike against opposition organizers of "illegal acts," in response to an opposition takeover of national resources or offices, or in support of the police if they are overwhelmed. End Summary.

Pro-Evo Signals from Senior Leadership

[1](#)2. (C) The 2008 changes in the high command appeared generally unpoliticized. However, the regular rotation of senior officers resulted in a slightly more pro-government outlook. Armed Forces Commander Luis Trigo, who already passed the government litmus test in leading the controversial deployment to Viru Viru airport last fall, is clearly more inclined to support Morales than his

predecessors. The Joint Command Chief of Staff Gen. Jose Luis Prudencio and Vice Minister of Defense Gen. Wilfredo Vargas have told us separately that anti-opposition and anti-U.S. Minister of Government Juan Ramon Quintana is increasing his involvement in military decision-making. In fact, in a recent meeting with a visiting U.S. Congressional delegation, President Morales made clear that he had relied on Quintana to advise him on how to respond to comments by SouthCom Commander Stravridis, hence the freeze on an exchange on notes regarding status of forces.

13. (C) Even among officials and officers with whom we have had open and productive relations, there appears to be reevaluation of some of the red lines for military engagement. For example, last year then-Army Commander Vargas told us the military would only be used against Media Luna autonomy efforts under strict conditions, such as taking over government buildings or energy infrastructure, establishing relations or trade agreement with foreign entities or governments, and outright declaring independence. Vargas did not otherwise seem interested in the Media Luna's autonomy machinations. Vargas told MILGP Commander recently, however, that the military would not allow any "illegal acts" to move forward, implying planned autonomy referenda in Media Luna departments.

Congress Provides "Legal" Cover for Crackdown

14. (C) Such incremental shifting of the military's constitutional duty has been further blurred by the February 28 passage of a law establishing a May 4 date for the pro-government draft constitution and requiring any departmental autonomy resolutions to originate in the Congress, de facto making the Santa Cruz referendum illegal. No doubt the legality of both these votes will be challenged (the opposition was physically blocked from participating and the session may not have had the required quorum), but they provide legal cover for a military crackdown. Prudencio and Vargas had already hinted prior to the vote that they considered the Santa Cruz autonomy referendum illegal. With the opposition blocked from Congress and without a functional Constitutional Court to rule on these issues (the Morales administration has forced out a quorum of justices from the court), what is legal has become what President Morales says is legal. Any officer that refuses orders under the premise that they are illegal is on increasingly shifting and nebulous ground.

Chavez Sending Ammunition

15. (S) Post has confirmed through multiple sources that two to five Bolivian Air Force C-130 transport planes were used in February to shuttle Venezuelan arms and ammunition to Bolivia. The Venezuelans are using Bolivian planes because Media Luna opposition leaders have refused to allow Venezuelan planes to land there since November and forced a Venezuelan flight crew to hastily depart shortly after landing at the Riberalta airport December 6 (reftel b). Two C-130s brought in 70 crates of weapons and about 150,000 pounds of ammunition during the week of February 18, according to the pilots. Last year post identified lack of ammunition as key practical impediment to military use in a crackdown of the Media Luna opposition movement. We do not know whether these shipments represent the full extent of Venezuelan efforts to ship arms to Bolivia, but these latest reports, confirmed by the pilots, add credence to opposition charges that the Venezuelans have been moving in weapons and ammunition into the Media Luna since at least 2007.

MAS-friendly Media Luna Command Changes

16. (C) We suspect 2008 changes in Media Luna field commands are more political than the high command rotation. Out of 19 Media Luna commands, typically about half would have rotated out under normal conditions under two-year tours. However,

16 commanders were swapped out in 2008, ostensibly for more government-loyal alternatives. DAO is familiar with four command changes in the Media Luna, three rotating in (including the 7th Division in Cochabamba) and one rotating out, that all fit this pattern. However, MILGP Commander knows the incoming Santa Cruz Division Commander and does not find him more pro-government than his predecessor. Additionally, Army Commander Mackay is known for his institutional approach to decision-making and it would be out of character for him to select commanders based on their political affiliation rather than their competence. If the MAS is trying to pack the Media Luna with like-minded commanders, we suspect it is being done against the wishes of Mackay, who is not a favorite of Morales' inner circle. Although some senior military officers have hinted at the political nature of the Media Luna command changes, we will not be able to confirm it until we have the opportunity to visit with more of the new field commanders.

Practice Run Allows Military to ID Problems

17. (C) The December military mobilization in the opposition-led Media Luna states provided the government a practice run and an opportunity to identify problems and problem commanders. We suspect the government realized an acute lack of supplies and support from field commanders in the Media Luna during the December mobilization and are taking corrective measures to improve the prospects the military will and can carry out the Morales administration's political will in the future. Although government-opposition tensions were diffused via a Holiday truce, as the deadline approaches on Media Luna autonomy resolutions and negotiations in Congress and between President Evo Morales and opposition prefects (governors) are moribund, the prospects for a violent standoff have resurfaced.

Evo Flirts with Irregular Groups

18. (C) During the last two weeks, Morales has twice insinuated the use of irregular groups to support his political agenda in the Media Luna. We continue to believe these arms are military bound as the shipments are coordinated by the military and it would be difficult logistically and operationally to transport the arms from military hands to irregular groups. However, we cannot rule out arms being transferred to radical pro-government groups. Morales hinted at this February 14, when he said a leader of a pro-government Santa Cruz group called him in the middle of the night asking for arms to force the opposition to "respect" Morales' administration. Many prominent civic and labor groups declared they would not take part in any violent, pro-government irregular force and, despite constant circulation that such forces exist from opposition rumor mills, we have yet to confirm any widespread irregular force. Although he shies away from outright endorsing and encouraging GOB-aligned groups from taking arms, he is certainly not condemning such action. If Evo is serious about using irregulars, it will surely call into question the trust Morales has in regular troops' ability and loyalty and may turn the military against him in a self-fulfilling prophesy. We find the veiled threat of paramilitary use a sign of weakness and likely exaggerated in order to cull fear in the hearts of autonomy leaders.

Continuing Impediments to Intervention

19. (C) Despite these troubling changes, many things have not changed since our last assessment of the military's proclivity to intervene in the Media Luna in November, 2007 (reftel d):

- The military view that quelling civil unrest is principally a police function that the military is not trained for nor responsible for. Conscripts are only two-months in service, have never fired a weapon, and have no crowd control training.
- An institutional reluctance to involve the military in

actions that could be perceived as political in nature. The military is still resentful of blame cast on it for deaths and injuries resulting from a 2003 crackdown on road blockers ordered by then-President Gonzalo Sanchez. With the November violence in Sucre still fresh in their minds, both military and police leaders are pressing for a political solution that will keep them in their barracks.

--Regulated mixing of conscripts: Conscripts are more or less evenly split between those from the pro-opposition Media Luna and pro-government highlands. Mixed Media Luna/highlands conscripts would be ill prepared and unlikely to support an overt offensive against Media Luna leaders.

--Although he has not insulted his troops lately, Evo continues to have a strained relationship with the military due to past institutional slights (especially regarding the military's efforts in capturing Che Guevara and defeating the communist insurgency in the 1960s) and his use of troops in government social projects. Evo's perceived disregard of the military has also deepened the divide between the high command and field commanders.

New Wild Cards: Pay Dispute and Opposition Calls

¶10. (C) Existing military resentments toward the government are exacerbated by recent demands for a pay raise from enlisted troops, who charge generals and colonels have received bonus' equal to a 30 percent pay raise to ensure their loyalty, while enlisted have gained only eight percent.

After rejecting an offer for a seven percent raise March 3 from Gen. Trigo, enlisted troops gave the government 10 days to provide pay increases of 30 to 70 percent.

¶11. (C) Santa Cruz Mayor Percy Fernandez openly called on the police and military March 3 to "convince them (the Morales Administration) to leave peacefully." Although other opposition leaders are more veiled with their statements, the legislation outlawing department-originated autonomy referendums passed during the government's kidnapping of Congress February 28 has only accelerated and deepened the opposition's autonomy movement. The opposition has offered military commanders an alternative "legal" path by pronouncing the government's illegalization of autonomy referenda itself illegal. Many active and retired senior military officers are either from the Media Luna or have married into the Media Luna while stationed at the many military bases there. Those officers may well be inclined to read their constitutional duties differently than the current high command in La Paz and sit out a proposed Media Luna crackdown or, perhaps, even side with the opposition.

Comment

¶12. (C) Despite changes in military capability and posture since 2007, we continue to find overtly repressive use of the military against opposition demonstrators or even use in general civil unrest unlikely, consistent with our 2007 analysis. That said, these changes are worth noting. With the lines apparently shifting on the will to intervene, we cannot rule out military participation in a pre-emptive strike against opposition organizers of "illegal acts," or to support the police if they are overwhelmed. As in 2007, the Bolivian military can also be expected to stand their ground defending government buildings, infrastructure, and energy hubs, consistent with their constitutional role.

¶13. (C) Given that he is surrounded with yes men, the biggest unknown of all is whether Morales is looking at the same indicators we are and coming to a similar conclusion. If he thinks the ability and inclination of the military has changed dramatically since 2007, i.e., that they are more likely to follow his orders, he may come to a different conclusion on use of force in 2008. If that happens, instead of extinguishing a civil war, Morales may instead ignite an internal war within his military that could end up burning Evo.

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